

December 3, 2004

Contact: Elvia Caldera, Health Education Specialist, 734-5900 x 288

Christmas Doesn't Have To Be "Bah, Humbug!" Season for People with Asthma

The long awaited holidays are here. Many have been waiting for that first snow fall and for the giving and charitable spirit that comes with Christmas. Although it is a joyous time of year, many adults and children may feel miserable because they suffer from asthma. People with asthma have to be particularly careful during the holidays.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2001, 20.3 million Americans had asthma and 4.8 million of those were children. In addition, asthma is the fourth most common reason for pediatric physician office visits, and is one of the leading causes of school absenteeism. In Idaho, according to data from the 2003 Idaho Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), 8% of adults reported having been told they have asthma. Asthma is, unfortunately, quite common among Americans and especially among children, and the holidays may be a time when those with asthma have to take extra measures to avoid exposing themselves to situations that may trigger an attack.

The American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology (AAAAI) recently published an article emphasizing that it is not so much the holiday itself that cause problems with asthma, but the things that come along with it. Adults and children with asthma have "triggers" which cause them to have an asthma attack, so it is important to be extremely careful during the winter and Christmas season.

During the holidays, people rush to buy gifts, plan parties, and attend functions so they tend to be more stressed than usual, said Elvia Caldera, Health Education Specialist and Asthma Program Coordinator with South Central District Health.

"We all have stress in our lives, but it seems that during this time of year it's worse and for asthmatics it could become one of the many stressors or triggers that can cause an asthma attack," said Caldera. "During stressful situations, people with asthma can become extremely short of breath, even though their airways are not blocked, due to changes in the body that lead to tightening of the muscles around the air passages in the lungs and make it difficult to breathe."

Asthmatics need to be extremely careful about avoiding stressful situations as much as possible because the immune system weakens and the person becomes more susceptible to illness, added Caldera. Information from AAAAI suggests that there are four ways in which a person can cope with stress:

- Take deep breaths and relax as much as possible;
- Develop strong social support networks;
- Be realistic about expectations regarding family functions; and
- Try a little humor therapy. Laughing can boost the immune system. But keep it under control...hysterical laughter can cause an asthma episode.

The best way to avoid letting stress get the best of adults and children with asthma is to closely follow the action plan that was designed for each person and take the medications when they are scheduled to be taken, said Caldera. Other suggestions to enjoy a stress free holiday, added Caldera, include planning ahead, allowing plenty of time to finish necessary tasks, and concentrating on activities that are being done in the present moment, rather than worrying about what has to be done next.

Since stress is not the only “trigger” that asthmatics face, Jean Woodward, Asthma Coordinator with the Idaho Asthma Prevention and Control Project, offers a list of additional stressors that both adults and children should be aware of during the holiday season:

- Living Christmas Trees: Remove pollen from living Christmas trees before bringing them indoors. This can be done by spraying the tree with water from a garden hose and letting it dry while keeping the tree stump in water.
- Artificial Christmas Trees, Lights, and Ornaments: These items can gather molds and dust while in storage. Before using the tree, lights, and ornaments, wipe them down with a damp cloth.
- Scented Candles, Potpourri, Perfumes, and Other Scented Products: These items can cause an asthma attack. These items should not be used in the home if an asthma sufferer is present.
- Smoke -- Tobacco or Fireplace: People who smoke should smoke outside and make sure that those with asthma, especially children, are not exposed to the smoke. Indoor air and outdoor air will improve if a wood-burning fireplace is used less.
- Exposure to Cold and Influenza Viruses: If your child has asthma, make sure he or she receives an influenza vaccination. It is important to follow the asthma management plan developed for the person with asthma. All people with asthma should get proper rest and maintain a proper diet.
- Changes in Weather: Weather changes can trigger asthma attacks. People with asthma should use their medication before exercising in the cold; a loose-fitting mask or scarf should be used to cover the mouth and nose so that warm air can enter the airways. If the weather is very cold and there is a lot of pollution, people with asthma should stay indoors.

People with asthma can enjoy the holiday season, with the right attitude and proper planning. According to Twin Falls resident and asthma sufferer Heidi Opheim, “I enjoy the holidays and I certainly take the proper measures to make sure that I don’t have problems. I try to keep the holidays as normal as possible. Just because I have asthma, it doesn’t mean that everybody else around me has to change things so that I don’t have problems. I take my medications and follow the proper precautions to avoid an asthma attack.”

“People with asthma can have just as much fun as other holiday revelers,” said Caldera. “So to those of you with asthma, say ‘Bah, Humbug!’ to asthma and enjoy your holidays!”

For more information about asthma and the holidays or other asthma topics, visit the following websites:

- American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology (AAAAI): <http://www.aaaai.org/patients/topicofthefmonth/12/03>
- American Lung Association: <http://www.lungusa.org/asthma/>
- Allergy and Asthma Network-Mothers of Asthmatics: <http://www.aanma.org>
- Idaho Department of Health and Welfare: www.healthandwelfare.idaho.gov

Side Bar

Take Steps to Manage Stress:

- Avoid stressful situations.
- Practice effective time-management skills.
- Set priorities and don’t take on more than you can handle.
- Pace yourself and set limits to help manage your time.

- Practice relaxation techniques.
- Take time out to relax.
- Practice relaxation techniques such as yoga or meditation.
- Practice deep breathing exercises.
- Learn to release and relieve muscle tension and clear your mind of negative thoughts.
- Exercise. It is an excellent way to burn off the accumulated effects of stress. It allows you to relax tense muscles, build stamina, and helps you get a good night's sleep.
- Eat well-balanced, nutritious meals.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Try to avoid caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine.
- Get plenty of sleep. If you are not sleeping well, you will have less energy and fewer resources for coping with stress

Source: American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology

###